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ON PAGE 1

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Military Seeks to Ease Environmental Curbs On MX Missile Bases

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 17 — The Defense Department, eager to begin work on the new MX mobile intercontinental missile, is seeking the approval of Congress for easing legal and environmental restrictions that many officials believe could pose major obstacles to building the multibillion-dollar weapon.

The officials disclosed today that the Pentagon was drafting a measure, to be known as the "MX Mobile Missile System Basing Act," which would ask Congress to allow the Air Force to sidestep provisions of existing environmental and land management laws that could impede the deployment of the new missile.

The officials said that the measure was designed to head off potential legal actions against the project that the Air Force fears could prevent it from meeting its 1986 deadline for deploying the first MX missile.

The measure has not yet received White House approval, the officials added, and is being discussed with other Government agencies.

Although the officials said they were confident that it would be approved by President Carter, they acknowledged that the measure was opposed by some officials in the Environmental Protection Agency and the Council on Environmental Quality, a White House agency.

The effort to ease restrictions on deploying the MX comes amid growing Congressional skepticism over the Air Force plan for basing the missile. In addition, there are doubts on Capitol Hill over whether the system will ever be built.

Cost Put at \$60 Billion

The Air Force has said that the project, one of the largest public works programs ever attempted, would cost \$33 billion. But in a recent study, the Congressional Budget Office estimated the cost of building and deploying 200 MX missiles at nearly \$60 billion.

Under the Air Force plan, each of the missiles would be deployed on a 300-ton transporter vehicle that would be driven around separate, circular roadways built in remote areas of Nevada and Utah. About 20 concrete shelters would be placed around each roadway. In the event of an enemy nuclear attack, each of the 200 MX missiles could be driven into one of the shelters and launched.

The entire system, known as the "race track," would cover 13,000 to 10,000 square miles, although less than 100 square miles would be fenced off from the public. The Pentagon estimates that more than 10,000 workers would be required to build the system and several thousand military officers and civilians would be needed to operate it.

Although Gov. Mike O'Callaghan of Nevada and Gov. Scott M. Matheson of Utah have expressed support for the project, public opposition to the MX in both states and elsewhere has gradually increased. Pentagon officials said, however, that they were less concerned about local opposition than they were to meeting the maze of legal requirements for major public works projects.

Avoiding a Legal Morass

The officials contended that the proposed legislation was not meant to evade environmental concerns but to streamline the process of gaining permission to begin work on the missile sites. "We just don't want to get bogged down in one court suit after another," a senior Air Force officer said.

Officials said the Pentagon measure would exempt the Air Force from environmental laws in three principal ways:

"It would simplify the task of selecting locations for the MX roadways. Under the National Environmental Protection Act, the Air Force would be required to study the environmental impact of deploying the missiles at six different locations around the country. Such studies would take at least two years, which would slow the start of construction in Utah and Nevada. Under its proposal, the Air Force would still prepare impact statements, but only 'to the degree deemed appropriate by the Secretary of Defense.'

"It would ease the task of gaining approval for setting aside land for the missile project. Under existing law, the Air Force could not seek Congressional approval to set aside land for the missiles until its construction plans were approved. Under the proposed measure, the Air Force would be allowed to set aside large tracts of Federal land early and decide later whether they would be suitable for missile sites."

"It would expedite the approval of Government agencies for the numerous construction activities associated with the missile project. Under the proposed measure, the Environmental Protection Agency and other Government offices would be given 270 days to decide whether any proposed construction threatened to increase air or water pollution. If the agencies failed to reach a decision by the end of this period, the construction would be allowed to proceed."

Although some environmental experts are reported to be sympathetic to the Pentagon's requests, they also have supported a more informal approach to easing restrictions on the MX project. But Pentagon officials reportedly argued that new legislation was the only way to insure that the Air Force would escape a series of lawsuits against the system.

Officials in the Defense Department concede that it was uncertain whether Congress would support the proposed legislation. Although there is strong support on Capitol Hill for the MX missile itself, the race track system has come under attack by liberals and conservatives alike. Earlier this month, for example, a measure proposed by Senator Ted Stevens, Republican of Alaska, prohibiting the Pentagon from spending any funds on the race track system was approved by a large margin.

Pentagon officials said that the MX measure was unlikely to go to Congress this year but could be submitted early next year. Some said that, for the measure to pass, it would probably have to be presented to the Senate before any vote was taken on the new treaty with the Soviet Union limiting strategic arms.

Some Senate liberals have held off criticizing the MX missile for fear that it would hurt the chances of gaining approval of the treaty. As a result, Pentagon aides have suggested that if the proposed legislation on the MX is considered before a vote on the arms treaty, it would win the support of some senators who might oppose the missile later on.